ORLANDO, Fla., Mar 31, 2004 /PRNewswire-FirstCall via COMTEX/ -- Darden Restaurants, Inc. (NYSE: DRI) today reported same-restaurant sales results for the five-week March fiscal month ended March 28, 2004. This period is the first month of Darden's fiscal 2004 fourth quarter.

Same-restaurant sales at Olive Garden were up 7% to 8% for fiscal March, which reflected a 5% to 6% increase in guest counts and an approximate 2% increase in check average. The check average increase was a result of a 2% to 3% increase in pricing and a 0% to 1% decrease from menu mix changes. Last year, Olive Garden had a 1% to 2% increase in same-restaurant sales.

Same-restaurant sales at Red Lobster were down 6% for fiscal March, which reflected a 6% decrease in guest counts and no change in the check average. The flat check average was a result of a 0% to 1% increase in pricing offset by a 0% to 1% decrease from menu mix changes. Last year, Red Lobster had a 4% to 5% increase in same-restaurant sales.

Darden Restaurants, Inc., headquartered in Orlando, FL, owns and operates over 1,300 Red Lobster, Olive Garden, Bahama Breeze, Smokey Bones, and Seasons 52 restaurants with annual sales of over $4.7 billion.

Forward-looking statements in this news release, if any, are made under the Safe Harbor provisions of the Private Securities Litigation Reform Act of 1995. Certain important factors could cause results to differ materially from those anticipated by the forward-looking statements, including the impact of changing economic or business conditions, the impact of competition, the availability of favorable credit and trade terms, the impact of changes in the cost or availability of food and real estate, government regulation, construction costs, weather conditions and other factors discussed from time to time in reports filed by the Company with the Securities and Exchange Commission.

SOURCE Darden Restaurants, Inc.

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